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LANDSCAPE
By H. Yoshida
From a Water-Color



BRUSH AND PENCIL

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THAMES WAREHOUSES

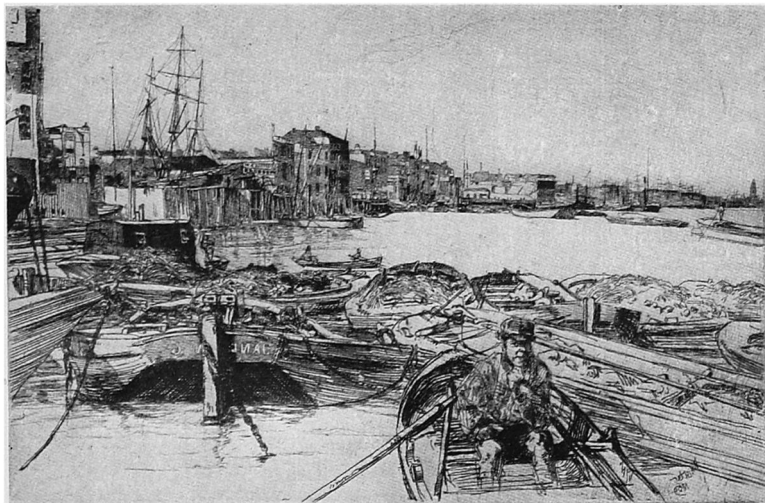
By J. McNeill Whistler
Thames Series of Etchings

JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER, THE ETCHER

The recent death of James McNeill Whistler has removed from the present-day world of art one of its most conspicuous, and his admirers would not hesitate to say one of its most important, figures. Throughout the whole of his long career—it is over a quarter of a century since Ruskin dubbed him a coxcomb and a charlatan, and was sued for his pains—he was before the public eye a militant genius, the supercilious, scathing preacher of reform, the apostle of a peculiar form of modernity in which one cannot fail to detect alike the influence of Velasquez and of the Japanese—a man unique in his personality, aggressive in his methods, heartless in his ridicule of other artists and of other art than his own, contemptuous in his denunciation of current vogues, forcing admiration by his abilities, and at the same time loading himself with reproach and contumely. From the days when he first claimed public attention to the time of his death, no artist was more thoroughly abused or more given to abuse. His manners, his methods, his ideals, all excited antagonism, and on his critics and detractors he trained with merciless force the battery of his unrivaled wit, irony, and sarcasm.

And now that the master is gone—for master he certainly was—how shall one estimate his contribution to his century's art, or where shall one place him in rank among his contemporaries? It might be a hazardous undertaking for any one at this time to venture an estimate

of his achievement, or to assign him a place in fame. His reputation in life was due not less to his pugnacity than to his painting, not less to the scars he etched on his associates with gall distilled into bitter words than to the lines he etched on his copper plates with acid. Whistler, it is true, outlived the period of his greatest notoriety, and of late years was comparatively obscure. But the man dominates everything he did, and it is to be feared that his unique personality



THE POOL
By J. McNeill Whistler
Thames Series of Etchings

may long have the effect of warping the judgment of both friends and enemies, making the one more indulgent and the other more censorious.

This much, however, may safely be said: His place as a painter is yet to be determined, but his rank as an etcher is fixed—assured for all time. The worth of his canvases is and doubtless will long be a matter of cavil and question; his etchings are supreme among modern achievements with the needle.

Whistler in a broad sense was a natural-born heretic, whose protests both in speech, teaching, and practice—unless we make an exception of his etching—ran to extravagance. And any review of his life and work cannot ignore the idiosyncrasies of the man and their direct connection with his art.

As a critic, at once appreciative of his genius and condemnatory of his habits, pointed out in a public utterance, from the outset his

career was perverse and paradoxical. He began by sniffing at the past and gazing upon the present with incomparable freshness and vivacity. Though in painting he vaguely harked back to Velasquez, and in etching to Rembrandt—I am using the modified words of another—assiduous self-cultivation kept him Whistlerian, Whistlerish, in its most acute implication. He was the apostle of the personal pronoun, first person, singular, the incarnation of egomania.

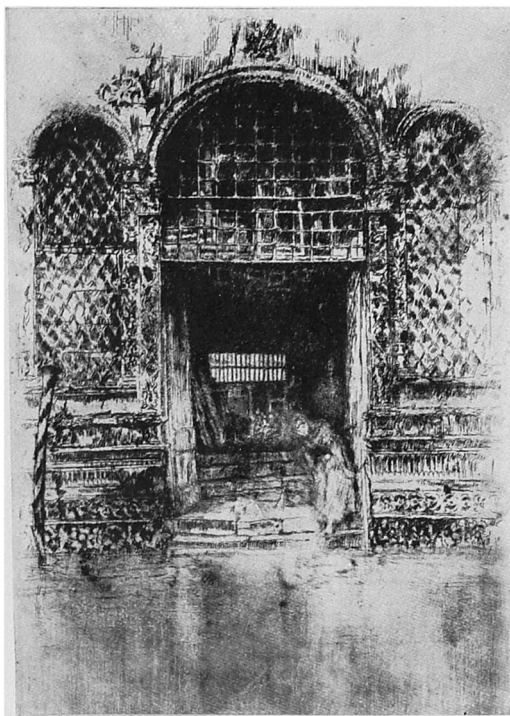


UNSAFE TENEMENT
By J. McNeill Whistler
Paris Series of Etchings

Whistler the social mountebank and Whistler the artist may seem dissimilar, but in essentials they were inseparable, identical. The Whistler of the infantile straw hat, long cloak, and hair dyed black—save a chance curl in the center, and that snow white, and tied about with a ribbon—the Whistler who forestalled caricature and parodied parody was the Whistler who gave us such luminous nocturnes, such captivating etchings and lithographs, fragmentary and inconsequent, but immortal in their negligence, which was always just the negligence of nature.

The artist's selection of subjects, his insistence on peculiar color schemes, his emphasis of the inconsequential, is just what one might expect from the character of the man. From the outset of his career he was a law unto himself. He studied, he taught, he worked in his

own way, and by methods determined by his own taste and judgment. He renounced all academic traditions, set himself up as a rebel in Paris, and consistently followed his theories to the end. In the matter of portraiture Velasquez was his ideal, and it must be admitted he might have had a worse mentor; in color schemes he



THE DOORWAY
By J. McNeill Whistler
Venice Series of Etchings

was captivated by the subdued tones and the flat stretches of the Japanese, whose influence was just beginning to be felt in Occidental art circles; and in etching he recognized the beauty and approximated more closely than any modern artist the principles of the great Dutch master whose work with the needle and copper plate is by common assent the very apogee of etching.

Candor compels one to admit that there was reason in all of Whistler's protests. How successfully he stemmed the tide he felt needed stemming is another matter. Certainly portraiture as he found it current among the studios needed the influence

he sought to impart; as regards color schemes, glare, luridity were the acute accents of the school with which he was brought in contact; and etching had lapsed from the simplicity, directness, and strength that make the plates of Rembrandt such marvels of beauty. Speaking broadly of his work, Whistler's impulse was good, his influence was in the right direction, and few of his efforts were abortive. Doubtless if he had been less flagrantly abusive, less bitterly condemnatory of the art in vogue, less acidulous and erratic in his methods, less

given to the poses of vanity and pretension, his power as a reformer would have been greater. As it was, personality too often overshadowed performance, and the fame of his invectives, his cynicism, his quarrels, in a sense took the place of the fame of his brush and needle work. Legitimate reputation paid tribute to mere notoriety.

Whistler's lien on fame, for the present at least, will doubtless rest upon his etchings, though many there be who subordinate these magnificent examples of line work to his canvases; and it is of his etchings that I wish here to speak and to give some opinions culled from the literature of criticism. In this work, as in his teaching and painting, he met strenuous opposition from those who could not or would not understand him, and consequently were unwilling to accord to him the credit that was his due. Henry Labouchere, the champion of Truth—with a capital T—was wont to speak slightly of "another crop of Mr. Whistler's little jokes." Frederick Wedmore, Harry Quilter, and many another critic used to indulge in their ill-natured flings. P. G. Hamerton was out of sympathy with the master's art, and systematically damned it with faint praise. In his book, which has become a sort of classic on etching, he says that Whistler's art is often admirable, but rarely affecting; that he was very observant but not poetically sensitive; that a figure to him was useful mainly because it could wear clothes; that he was a master of line but not of chiaroscuro; that the lighting of his subjects was bad and that the eye sought in vain for a



THE DYER
By J. McNeill Whistler
Venice Series of Etchings

ing of his subjects was bad and that the eye sought in vain for a



ANNIE SEATED

By J. McNeill Whistler

space of tranquil light or quiet shade; and others such criticisms.

But these manifestations of faulty judgment or of personal unkindness in no way disturbed or influenced the doughty Whistler. In fact, opposition, even condemnation, served as a tonic. He used to say he loved his enemies because their adverse criticism kept him busy, either fighting them or proving them idiots. As a matter of fact, Whistler was greater than the critics and connoisseurs who carped at him. He knew the resources and the limitations of the etcher's art better than they, and the master can well afford to leave his plates to refute the strictures that have been made upon them.

Apart from any considerations of technique, the fascinations of Whistler's etchings is not far to seek. As has frequently been pointed out, the peculiar charm of his plates lies in their sprightly, casual veritism, their wholesome indifference to academic beauty. Nowhere, as a close student of his work has said, is there the least attempt to prettify nature, to provoke sentiments other than æsthetic. His plates exalt the incidental, the indifferent; they surprise beauty in a dog straying across the street, in the shabby shop fronts of Chelsea, the wharves and warehouses of the Pool, the bridges and barges along the Thames. While subsisting precariously in Venice on polenta and macaroni, Whistler seems purposely to have ignored the Venice of tradition, of Turner, and of Canale, and gone about ferreting out old bridges and archways, bits full of tattered individuality.

His viewpoint was always personal and whimsical, never literary or pictorial. An absolute master of line, a subtle, rapid workman, he has recorded these scattered impressions with, as the same critic affirms, a freedom and precision quite beyond precedent. The Thames etchings are clearly the best, but they are all enchanting in their nonchalance, their unpoetical poetry.

Whistler was an impressionist after his own peculiar pattern. It was not facts, but his impression of facts that he sought to record; and be it in painting or in etching, he was always "faithful to the

coloring of his own spirit." Charles H. Caffin, in a study of Whistler, rightly emphasizes this peculiar phase of the master's work. Said he:

"To one who seeks to render, not the facts, but his sense of the facts, etching offers greater freedom than painting. It is the art of all others which permits an artist to be recognized by what he *omits*, the one in which the means employed may be most pregnant of suggestion, and in closest accord with the personal idiosyncrasy of the man. To Whistler, therefore, with his intense individuality, his discerning search for the significance of beauty, and his instinct for simplicity and economy of means, which will yet yield a full complexity of meaning, etching early became a cherished form of expression. In the 'Little French Series' (1858), 'The Thames Series' (1871), the 'First Venice Series' (1880), and the 'Second Venice Series' (1887), as well as in other plates etched in France, Holland, and Belgium, he has proved himself the greatest master of the needle since Rembrandt. Indeed, the eminent painter-etcher and connoisseur Sir Francis Seymour Haden is credited with the assertion that if he had to dispose of either his Rembrandts or his Whistlers, it would be the former that he would relinquish." A noble tribute, if report be true.

"There is a great difference," continues Mr. Caffin, and his distinction is worth quoting, "even in the point of view between the Dutch master and his modern rival. Both approach their subject, if one may say so, in a reverential way. But the former with an absorption in the scene and a desire to reproduce it faithfully. Whistler, on the other hand, with more aloofness of feeling, selecting the mood or phase of it on which he chooses to dwell that he may inform it with his own personal sense of significance. The Rembrandt print—to borrow De Quincey's distinction—is rather a triumph of knowledge; the Whistler a triumph of power. While the method of both represents the highest degree of pregnant succinctness, Rembrandt drew



PORTRAIT OF BECQUET
By J. McNeill Whistler

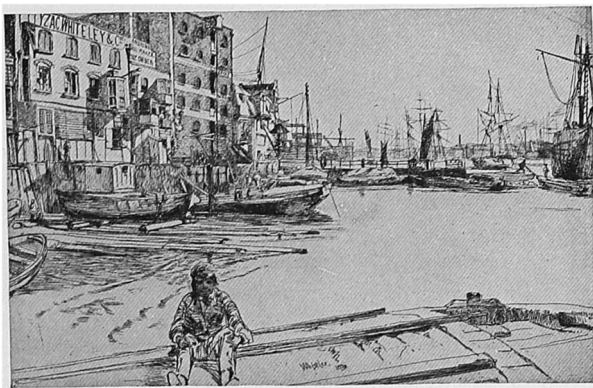
the landscape while Whistler transposes from it. The visible means in his later etchings become less and less, their significance continually fuller; and in his study of phases of nature he has carried the interpretation of light and atmosphere beyond the limits of Rembrandt."

In a catalogue of Whistler's etchings published in 1899, no less than three hundred and seventy-two plates are listed and described. This long list attests the deep interest of the artist in the needle and copper plate; and the variety of his subjects is ample witness to the breadth of his sympathies. To describe individual plates would scarcely be germane to my purpose, which is to give a general survey of the character and quality of the artist's achievement, rather than to follow him in the details of his work and discuss the means by which he produced his inimitable results.

As naturally might be expected in view of Whistler's productivity, his plates are uneven in their excellence, and they differ no less markedly in their intrinsic beauty and interest. They are all small—a large plate was to Whistler an abomination—and they include portraits, ramshackles, landscapes, wharf scenes, doorways, shop fronts, interiors, nudes, still-life, figure studies, bridges, nocturnes, palaces, street scenes, and in fact everything that appealed to him as possessing the qualities, however commonplace, that were worthy of pictorial art. It mattered not to Whistler whether others could see beauty in the scenes that claimed his rapt attention; indeed, his rebel spirit seems often to have prompted him to the selection of the most unpromising of subjects, as if he wished by perpetuating trifles in artistic guise to show the public what beauty genius could evolve out

of nothing. The etchings here-with reproduced are thoroughly characteristic and may serve to give an idea of the master's art.

A citation of opinions is at least cumulative in its effect, and perhaps



EAGLE WHARF
By J. McNeill Whistler

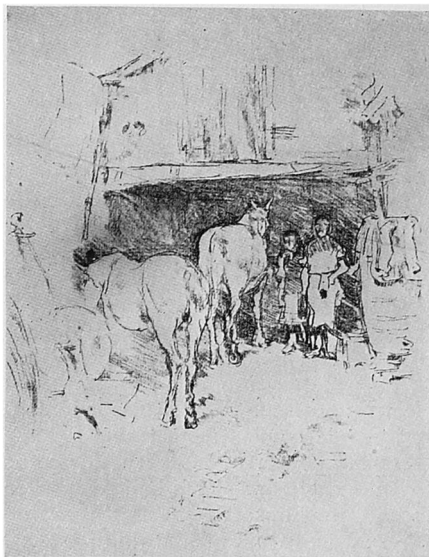
no more satisfactory witness to the supreme excellence of Whistler as an etcher could be adduced than the views of people competent to pass judgment. I have given Mr. Caffin's, and perhaps I cannot better enforce my own views than by quoting the words of two or three other students of his work.

"Mr. Whistler's name is, of course, the first that should be mentioned in the list of American etchers," said Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer, shortly after the first Venice series had been published. "Though most of his art education was obtained in Paris, and though his long residence in England has caused him to be identified with the

younger English school, Whistler is an American by birth and breeding; and—what is of more importance, in deciding his artistic nationality—he is, it seems to me, quite peculiarly American in his temperament. He is one of the very first few among living etchers, and his plates assisted those of Mr. Haden in the good work of bringing the etcher's art once more into wide popularity.

"Mr. Whistler does not often try for even approximate tonality, but in individuality, in sentiment, and in free, frank, artistic, and telling use of the line he has no superior among the moderns, and few equals in any age. His work is at times extremely strong and always supremely delicate and wonderfully vital and original. His strength is nervous, brilliant, and incisive, not massive like that of Mr. Haden's; but his utmost delicacy has never a hint of commonplace or weakness. Every stroke has meaning, and each is set with beautiful skill and rare artistic feeling.

"His earliest plates—a series representing the Thames in and about London—had at the time of their publication, some twelve years back, a quite noteworthy influence in showing what may be done with materials essentially modern and supposedly unpicturesque. His figure and portrait etchings are to me the finest that have come from any living hand. Mr. Whistler has stood, by fact of his foreign



THE BLACKSMITH'S SHOP—LITHOGRAPH
By J. McNeill Whistler

residence, outside of the main current of the art as developed in America; but he has had a strong direct influence upon some few of our men, as well as a stronger indirect influence upon the art in general."

"I have told Mr. Whistler with much plainness if levity of speech," says Frederick Wedmore, who later grew to see the folly of his ways in criticising the artist's plates, "that when in the Realm of the Blest he desired, on meeting Velasquez and Rembrandt, not to disappoint them, he must be provided with his Thames etchings in their first states. Certainly it would be a potent introduction. But I am not sure but the best of the Venetian prints would serve Mr. Whistler in as good stead. . . . The Venetian etchings—'Venice' and the 'Twenty-Six'—some people thought were not satisfactory because they did not record that Venice which the cultivated tourist, with his guide-books and his volumes of Ruskin, goes out from London to see. But I doubt if Mr. Whistler troubled himself with the guide-books, or read his Ruskin with religious attention. Mr. Ruskin, of course, had seen Venice nobly; Mr. Fergusson and a score of admirable architects had seen it learnedly; but Mr. Whistler would see it for himself; that is to say, he would see in his own way the Present and would see it quite as certainly as the Past.

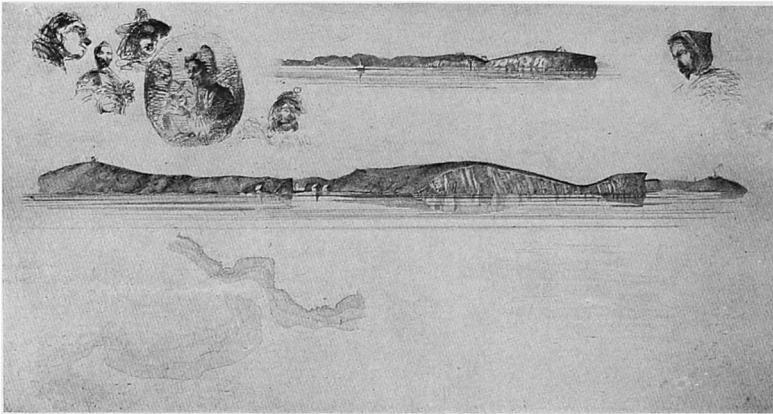
"The architecture of Venice had impressed men so profoundly that it was not easy in a moment to realize that here was a great artist whose work it had not been permitted to dominate. The Past and its record were not Whistler's principal affair. For him the lines of the steamboat, the lines of the fishing tackle, the shadow under the squalid archway, the wayward vine of the garden, had been as fascinating, as engaging, as worthy of chronicle, as the dome of St. Mark's.

"Yet we have not properly understood Mr. Whistler's work in England if we suppose it could be otherwise. From associations of Literature and History this artist from the first had cut himself adrift. His subject was what he saw, or what he decided to see, and not something that he had heard about it. He had dispensed from the beginning with those aids to the provocation of interest which appeal most strongly to the world—to the person of sentiment, to the literary lady, to the man in the street. We were to be interested—if we were interested at all—in the happy accidents of line and light he had perceived, in his dextrous record, in his scientific adaptation."

"In the Thames plates" says Joseph Pennell, always one of Whistler's most ardent admirers and staunchest supporters, "it was Mr. Whistler's aim to show the river as it was in 1859, and each one of them is a little portrait of a place, a perfect work of art. For the rendering, as Mr. Whistler has rendered them, of these old houses, in which every brick and every tile has been studied, every window-frame rightly drawn, every bit of color truly suggested, is as much portraiture and as difficult to accomplish as to give the portrait of the

old lighterman sitting in his barge. [A phase of Whistler's work that doubtless rarely commands the consideration of the general public.]

"So difficult is it, indeed, that but two men in the whole history of the world have done such a thing. The one a Dutchman of the seventeenth century; the other an American, happily living and working today (this was written in 1895). The one, Rembrandt, died virtually uncared for and ignored by his contemporaries; if the other lives and still works it is only because he has the courage of a great artist, which has enabled him during a whole lifetime to fight through the insults and abuse that have been hurled at him unceasingly, from



COAST SURVEY
By J. McNeill Whistler
Artist's First Etching

the highest critical authority in England—as John Ruskin was considered at one time—to the veriest halfpenny-a-liner; none was too high or too low to revile this artist, the man who certainly—we all know it now—will carry on the traditions of art to future generations.

"Now everything he has produced is perfect, he is told; but as he himself has said, if it has been found good to-day, why was it not also good at the time it was brought forth? As I have said, these etchings are perfect portraits of the London that we of the younger generation have never seen, but Mr. Whistler has made it so real for us that it will live forever. We may talk of Hollar, of Canaletto, of Piranesi, of Hogarth, but not even that master makes us feel the reality as Mr. Whistler does."

"That Whistler has a passport to fame, few will deny," says W. G. Bowdoin, "but it is more than likely that his fame will be secured because of his etchings rather than his paintings. If Whistler

has a serious fault where his etchings are concerned, it lies in his having etched too much. . . . Two things, it will be easily seen, have largely occupied Mr. Whistler as an artist, and these two things are the arrangement of colors in harmonious masses, and the group-



RIAULT. THE ENGRAVER
By J. McNeill Whistler

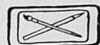
ing of light and shade. This has served in an accented way as his life inspiration, and the best results he has been able to secure are to be found in decorative art, in work not dominated by a subject. Some of Whistler's finest achievements in the study of light and shade are to be found in some half-dozen of his etchings that belong to that series in which the artist portrays for our curious pleasure the common sights and commonplace features of the shores and banks of the Thames. Quaintness of form stands out boldly in this series and lends a most pleasing charm to the lines of wharf and

warehouse, that present, theoretically at least, most unpromising art subjects. With originality and enthusiasm has he seized and fixed upon his etched plate the delightful outline oddities arising from roof, window, building, and their appurtenances in the light changes that come and go.

"That Whistler has serious limitations is seen in his defective figure drawing, and again in his narrow power, when compared with



JOE
By J. McNeill Whistler



the great marine-painters, of drawing the forms of water, whether a river like the Thames is chosen, or the restless sea, with its smooth surface or its curling billows. Some of the best of Whistler's work in etching that preserves studies of quaint places that either have, or soon will have, disappeared, and but for these etchings would be forgotten, are 'The London Bridge,' 'The Little Limehouse,' 'Billingsgate,' 'Hungerford Bridge,' 'Thames Police,' and 'Black Lion Wharf.' In these, at least, his art has shown qualities that compel admiration."

I have given this budget of opinions that the reader may not merely have my own views, but that he may enjoy the benefit of different judgments and of different viewpoints. Other witnesses to Whistler's pre-eminence as an etcher might be cited, but those adduced will suffice. Whatever be the ultimate judgment as to Whistler the man and as to Whistler the painter, lithographer, and teacher, it is scarcely to be entertained that the decision of future generations as to his pre-eminence as an etcher will differ materially from that of to-day. In the same breath the work of no other modern etcher is to be mentioned with Whistler's save only that of Seymour Haden, and the etchings of these two artists are so unlike as scarcely to make comparison permissible. The name of Whistler as an etcher has been linked with that of Rembrandt. It is a compliment merited by achievement, and if everything else Whistler has done save his etchings be forgotten, it is safe enough to say his fame will be secure for all time.

FREDERICK W. MORTON.



JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER, THE PAINTER

The death of James McNeill Whistler recalls a prophecy by Sheridan Ford, which I remember seeing some years ago in the *Galignani Messenger* of Paris. Said that clever versifier, who was more appreciative of Whistler's genius than many of the critics:

"For many years the prints of London Town
Have treated 'Jimmie' Whistler as a clown,
While Yankee journals tailed the cockney van
And showed him as a snobbish, vain old man.
He's all of that; but he is something more,
And years to be his prestige shall restore.
When 'Jimmie' sleeps beneath the daisied sod—
In peace at last with man if not with God—
Then we'll forget the 'Jimmie' whom we know,
The vulgar 'Jimmie' posed for public show,
Who proves in ways at war with wit and art
That workers and their work are things apart."

There is certainly much in Whistler's career that his best friends and most ardent admirers would wish to forget; but, as Ford prophesies,